

Semicontinuous

Exod. 14:19–31

Ps. 114

Complementary

Gen. 50:15–21

Ps. 103:(1–7), 8–13

Rom. 14:1–12

Matt. 18:21–35

Forgiven and Forgiving

**Goal for
the Session**

*Adults will identify and endeavor to practice the forgiveness
Jesus summons in the parable of a king and his servants.*

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 18:21–35

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Lewis R. Donelson

The passage, to the surprise and chagrin of many Christians, concludes, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (v. 35). Despite Christian nervousness about the implied limitation on God’s mercy, readers of Matthew have long noted that the provisional nature of God’s forgiveness that is articulated here is also articulated throughout the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew at least, God’s forgiveness to some extent depends upon our forgiveness. Christians, who live under God’s grace and forgiveness, will be judged by this same God, mostly by whether they show the same grace and forgiveness to others.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Kathryn D. Blanchard

Peter makes explicit the perennial question that plagues all Christians in all times and places: When may we stop forgiving those who offend us repeatedly? Christians since the early church have consistently taken the meaning of Jesus’ answer—whether translated “seventy-seven” or “seventy times seven”—to be crystal clear: never. God is a God who forgives completely, and the body of Christ is called to do likewise. However, even God’s forgiveness has its limits. The theological tenet that God’s “default” stance toward the penitent is one of mercy must lead to the conviction that God’s people are those who likewise practice mercy—willingly, concretely, and as a communal way of life.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn

Marjorie Thompson writes: “To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment may seem. . . . Forgiveness involves excusing persons from the *punitive consequences* they deserve because of their behavior. The behavior remains condemned, but the offender is released from its effects as far as the forgiver is concerned. Forgiveness means the power of the original wound’s power to hold us trapped is broken.”

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Charles L. Campbell

The issue here is not how many times an isolated individual should forgive some other random person who sins against him or her. Rather, the context is the community of faith. The concern here is the life of the church and the practices necessary to build up the community of faith. At the heart of those practices is forgiveness, not as an isolated act, but as an ongoing activity among members of the community. Within this context, there can be no limit on forgiveness, because it is a never-ending practice that is essential to the life of the church.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 18:21–35

Focus on Your Teaching

All adults face the challenge of forgiving others and accepting forgiveness. This challenge ranges in practice from simple matters to life-changing events. Will I forgive? Will I accept forgiveness offered? Must I forgive in order to be forgiven? Are there limits to what one should forgive? If so, what are they? Today's passage tells a provocative story about forgiveness that goes to the heart of these questions. Some may hear Jesus' teaching as untenable. Others may hear it as a godsend. Be aware that some in your group may be struggling with forgiveness and hold strong emotions about the topic.

Bless me, O God, with patience in my preparation and with Spirit in my leading. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 20, 2020

For Responding

- option 1: Resource Sheet 1
- option 2: pens, paper

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome participants as they arrive. Introduce any newcomers.

Form pairs and invite participants to call to mind the first time they remember being forgiven for something. Have them briefly tell that experience to their partner. Then ask them to remember the first time they forgave someone else. Invite them to tell this experience to their partner.

After the conversations in pairs, invite participants to silently reflect on a current issue or relationship in their lives where forgiving another, or accepting forgiveness, is posing a challenge. Invite a few volunteers to tell what makes forgiving or receiving forgiveness difficult.

Relate that today's session explores a parable Jesus offers in response to a question about the limits of forgiveness.

Lead the group in this prayer or one of your choosing:

Gracious God, we come with questions as well as faith. Meet us here with your grace that receives us as we are, even as it readies us for who you call us to be. Amen.

EXPLORING

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Parables). Ask for one or more volunteers to read it aloud—but at this point, do not read its final paragraph (“One further note . . .”). Encourage participants to ask questions raised by the material, and/or to underscore insights about parables they see as helpful. Affirm that this background on parables is provided not only for

today's passage, but also for the parables from Matthew that will be the focus of a number of future sessions. Encourage participants to keep this resource sheet for reference.

Have the group silently read Matthew 18:21–35 as if for the first time. Ask participants to briefly identify what they find most surprising; most comforting; most questionable.

Read Matthew 18:21–22 aloud to the group. Clarify that “member of the church” is translated from the Greek word for “brother.” Invite participants to consider how that difference in translation might affect the scope or interpretation of this passage. Inform the group that some rabbinic teachings of this era put the “limit” on forgiveness at three times, which makes Peter’s question far more generous than he is often credited for here.

Read the final paragraph of Resource Sheet 2. Talk about the function of exaggeration in this parable. Ask why simply limiting the teaching to literal details might cause confusion or misapplication.

Read Matthew 18:23–27 to the group. Encourage participants to identify what the passage reveals about: the king; the first servant; the nature of the debt; and the nature of forgiveness.

Call attention to verse 27, where the king decides to forgive the first servant “out of pity.” Cite the information in the sidebar about the more literal meaning of this word, and its connection to compassion. Encourage participants to envision possible connections between the exercise of compassion and the exercise of forgiveness by the king for this servant.

Read Matthew 18:28–31 to the group. Explore how these verses are structured in a parallel way to verses 25–27. What is revealed in this portion of the parable about the first servant; about the community comprised of the fellow servants?

Read Matthew 18:32–34 to the group. Discuss what this section reveals about forgiveness, both in terms of motivation and in terms of “conditions.”

Read Matthew 18:35. Ask the group: Do you hear this as good or bad news, and why? Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 18:21–35). Have participants read the “What?” excerpt silently. Invite reactions to the way it speaks of the “provisional” (conditional) nature of God’s forgiveness.

Form two groups. Assign the following lectionary readings for today as follows: Psalm 103 to the first group and Genesis 50:15–21 to the second. Direct each group to discuss and prepare a brief report on what their passage reveals about the nature of forgiveness, and how (and by whom) forgiveness is modeled in it. Gather the groups together for the reports. At the end, discuss how those insights into forgiveness compare to and contrast with the teachings on forgiveness in Jesus’ parable. Ask participants how they believe forgiveness should be modeled after exploring all the lectionary readings.

“Out of pity” is derived from the Greek word *splagchnizomai*, the root of which literally means the “bowels” or “guts.” In that era, that was where emotions were believed to be centered. This same word is also often translated as “compassion.”

EASY
PREP

If you use this option in Responding, be sensitive to adults who have suffered—or inflicted—abuse. This does not mean that you cannot use this option with them. For some, it may be just what is needed to move forward.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. What Forgiveness Means** The practice of forgiveness begins with understanding what forgiveness does and does not do. Direct participants to read the “So What?” excerpt silently. Invite general responses to the reading. Encourage participants to identify what they find hardest to accept in this excerpt—and how that relates to the challenge they experience in extending (or receiving) forgiveness. Have them silently reflect on the most helpful insight into forgiveness that this excerpt offers. Challenge participants to incorporate this insight into an opportunity to forgive another person this week.
- 2. Journaling** Forgiveness may entail significant personal reflection before its practice. Invite participants to write a journal entry that grows out of this session. It may be reflecting on ideas and questions raised today. It may focus on a particular situation in their lives where they are finding it difficult to forgive. Direct participants to return to this journal entry in another day or two, and to continue the thoughts stimulated—and/or to carry through on the forgiveness evoked.
- 3. Forgiveness Is Not Forgetting** The practice of forgiveness should not consign people to remain in abusive situations, nor empower abusers to continue such behavior. In the parable, the one who abuses forgiveness by forgetting its gift discovers its conditionality. Discuss how forgiveness relates to situations where abuse has occurred: between spouses, within families, in congregations. Invite participants to wrestle with how forgiveness coupled with remembrance of the offending action might make it possible for the parties to move forward rather than backward. Invite participants to pray this week for a situation where both forgiveness and remembrance are needed for the sake of wholeness.

CLOSING

Gather the participants in a circle. Invite them to offer brief phrases that summarize what they will take from this session and Jesus’ parable. Affirm that these may take the form of questions as well as statements. Then give instructions for the following commissioning: Turn to the person on your right and say: “*Name*, God has forgiven you. Go now, and forgive.” Go first by turning to the person on your right and offering them this commission. When all have been so commissioned, close with this prayer or one of your choosing:

As a father and mother have compassion on their children, so God has compassion—and forgiveness—on us. As we have been so blessed, let us then bless those around us. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 20, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

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Parables

Seven of the remaining 12 sessions in this quarter (including today's) are from Matthew. Of those seven, five consist of parables (and a sixth teaching is clearly parable-like).

Although the church almost exclusively identifies parables with Jesus, the Old Testament has several examples of such teachings. The prophet Isaiah tells a parable about a vineyard that yielded wild grapes to convey the basis for God's impending judgment against Israel in the practices of injustice and violence (Isaiah 5:1–7). Similarly, the prophet Nathan tells King David the parable of the ewe lamb to make the king confront his culpability in the murder of Uriah (2 Samuel 12:1–10).

Some of Jesus' parables are told in situations of conflict (Luke 15:1–3). More generally, they provided listeners in his day with an object or experience or relationship in everyday life that Jesus uses to invoke or convey some spiritual truth.

Many parables, particularly those in Matthew, identify their intent as revealing some aspect of God's sovereign realm ("kingdom of heaven"). Some people may take that to mean that parables reveal what life will be like in the afterlife. Certainly God's reign points toward the future. Clearly, the qualities of that realm have not been fully realized on earth. We wait and hope with longing for such fulfillment. But the reign and realm of God exist now, in our midst. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:21). Parables describe characteristics and qualities of God's reign that intend to transform how we live on this side of the grave.

One further note: Jesus often infuses parables with extreme hyperbole. In this week's parable, the debt of the first servant is said to be "ten thousand talents." "Ten thousand" was the highest numerical notation in that day. Likewise, a talent was the largest sum of money. Such a debt would have taken an ordinary day laborer more than 136,000 years to repay. The exaggerations in Jesus' parables are not to be understood literally, but spiritually. It is an impossible debt to incur, yet even it is forgiven. Jesus does not mean that forgiveness reaches its limit on the 78th offense (or 491st, as some manuscripts render that formula). He means that God's forgiveness has no limits.

